

## Arabic at IWP: A History

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**Abstract:** Over the past fifty years, the International Writing Program (IWP) has brought almost 1,500 writers from nearly 150 countries to Iowa City for its annual Fall Residency. Of those writers, about 80 have been Arabic-speaking writers from 13 countries around the Middle East and North Africa. This is an archival research project into the social and political contexts and effects of Arabic-speaking writers participating in the Fall Residency, from Egyptian writer Ali Shalash in 1976 until the present day, examining trends and making inferences about the Arabic literary scene relative to the history of IWP. Important to the research are not only internal program records, including the writers' original creative work and translations, but also documents in the IWP archives, maps of geographical data from the UI Libraries, administrative documents from the Paul Engle Papers in Special Collections and from the program's electronic records since 2000, testimonials from past Arabic-speaking participants in the program, and bibliographic information from UI sources.

### Introduction

Between 1976 and 2017, some eighty Arabic-speaking writers participated in the International Writing Program Fall Residency. Hailing from 13 different countries, from Iraq to Morocco and Syria to Sudan, these writers have taken on an increasingly important role in the program's mission of cultural diplomacy and exchange, supported in part by the efforts of private donors as well as the U.S. State Department, namely the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

That said, the scope of this research document is delimited by language rather than by nationality or any other category, because within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region there are numerous cultural and linguistic borders that predate the somewhat arbitrary post-colonial political divisions: it is one thing to speak of Arabic writing, and quite another when one adds Hebrew or Kurdish or Turkish or French to the mix, as one would have to do in order to use geopolitical designations. Additionally, more than one Arabic-speaking IWP resident has made a permanent home outside of the MENA region, largely due to political concerns. So, I discuss here the Arabic-language literary sphere specifically as a cultural subspace, rather than a geographic or cultural entity. Moreover, I am only literate in two regional languages, Arabic and French, so any attempt to conduct a broader analysis would be naturally skewed in favor of the languages and texts and writers available to me, to the detriment of the others.

### A word on Arabic

The Arabic language and its literature are an interesting puzzle. Its diglossic nature demands that the relationship between the written language (Modern Standard Arabic, also known as *fusha*) and whichever variety of its spoken counterpart (dialect, or *amiyya*) you prefer is tenuous at best. Although some spoken dialects are more recognizable than others, carrying

more cultural influence through exported music (urban Lebanese) or film (Cairene Egyptian), many other dialects are mutually unintelligible; for instance, it is unlikely that a someone from Morocco and someone from Iraq will be able to understand one another (Qasid Institute). All Arabic speakers use the same written language, though with slight regional flavors found in the diction. But to be a writer in Arabic requires an impressive command of the complex grammar system and classical vocabulary, and many do not even make the attempt. (It's rather a new thing to write in Arabic at all in places like Morocco, where most of the last generation of literary giants were literate only in French.)

It's also rather a new thing in some parts of the MENA region to write in dialect, in a semi-standardized form. As a literary phenomenon, this has largely been limited to Egypt, but the rise of social media and Internet use has provided an excellent, free-access platform for writing of all kinds, including written representations of Arabic dialects. The choice of which language to write in is inherently political, as the Arabic language is so closely tied to the Arab cultural designator and an Islamic religious identity. In Morocco, for instance, the official language is Modern Standard Arabic, while the spoken dialect of the majority of the population, known as *darija*, has no official status whatsoever. Language as a spoken entity as opposed to a written one exists on an entirely different plane, which heavily impacts both the literary scene and Arabic literacy more broadly.

## Countries and trends

Every year, while making decisions about which writers to invite to the program, Fall Residency staff consider diversity of genre and geography, but also who might be considered a “multiplier”: someone with influence in their home country, who will take what they've learned in Iowa and build upon it when they return home (Merrill). In the end, participation is always derived from a mix of factors, such as the priorities of funding entities, including in large part the U.S. State Department. Although writers have come to Iowa from 13 different countries, the field of IWP residents is dominated by writers from Egypt, the Palestinian Territories, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, before 1988 all of the Arabic-speaking writers came from either Egypt or the Palestinian Territories, which would indicate the influence of State Department priorities on the IWP selection process, or that this crop of writers brought a significant “multiplier” effect, or perhaps both.

Writers from Egypt have ruled the program's roster, and from the beginning have formed or participated in a vibrant community of literary giants in Egypt and abroad (a community which included Naguib Mahfouz and Tayeb Salih, among others). Ali Shalash (IWP '76), the first Arabic-speaking writer in the program, was a personal friend of several of the subsequent residents even before he came to Iowa, including Hani Elkadi and Mohammed Abu Senna (Van Allen-Shalash). It is perhaps worth noting that President Anwar Sadat signed the Sinai Interim Agreement in 1975, taking steps to strengthen Egypt's diplomatic relations with the United States while loosening ties to the Soviet Union. (The Camp David Accords would follow in 1978.) It was in the context of this changing relationship with the United States that Ali Shalash first came in 1976, and his successors built upon that foundation in the following years.

In 1977 Jimmy Carter became the first U.S. president to publicly support the establishment of a Palestinian<sup>1</sup> state or entertain the possibility of dealing with the PLO as

anything but a terrorist organization (Carter). Later that same year, the first Palestinian writer to join the residency, the poet Abdul Latif Aqel, arrived at IWP, even though formal diplomatic relations would not exist between the United States and the PLO until 1988, when the PLO officially recognized the State of Israel.

Among the best-known Palestinian residents is Sahar Khalifeh, a novelist and feminist activist from Nablus who came to Iowa for the residency in 1978 on a Fulbright grant and stayed to complete a Ph.D. in Women's Studies at the University of Iowa. Described by Evalyn Van Allen-Shalash as "larger than life" and "a force of nature," she is the first to come to mind when one thinks of the multiplying effect of IWP influence. In an interview with Peter Nazareth, Khalifeh said:

Writers in the Arab world were not known as artists until very recently... Some [older writers] were respected more even then, but they were not artists. They were very traditional and classical writers who used to write in a rigid and uninspired way, far from being artists. Not everything you write is art, you know. You have to have the mood, the creative ability, to have certain images, to know how to use the language in a romantic manner, or in an antagonizing or revolutionary manner; you have to be able to use the language in an artistic way that influences people, affects their feelings and carries them with you. Few writers in the Arab world were really artists.

She went on to found the Women's Affairs Center in 1991, which began in Nablus and then moved to Gaza City (Abdel-Shafi).

For writers in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, there is no life or art separate from politics. Israeli Arab novelist and journalist Odeh Bisharat (IWP '16) said by way of example:

A Palestinian youth in the occupied territory, needs to pass checkpoints when he wants to meet his girlfriend. Therefore, if he wants to write a simple love story, he must include barriers in it. We have good writers who know how to write about the individual human life within the complicated Arab situation. On the other hand, there are those whose creativity is only a kind of political manifesto, nothing more.

As for Iraq, the arrival of Samira Al-Mana and Saadi Simawe, the two first Iraqi writers in the residency, coincided with the beginning of Operation Desert Shield, President George H.W. Bush's 1990 military operation to drive Saddam Hussein's forces out of Kuwait, which began the First Gulf War. Starting nearly twenty years later in 2009, Iraqi writers have come to Iowa just about every year, due in part to additional funding made available during the invasion (Merrill), and started up a lasting partnership between the literary community in Iowa City and the one in Baghdad.

Iraqi writers face a similar challenge to their Israeli and Palestinian peers—that of writing amid political turmoil and even war. "Living in Iraq means that I am from the country of breaking news," writes filmmaker and novelist Mortada Gzar.

People are used to opening up a can of media and feeding their minds on routine scenes of war in Iraq. But apart from the official story of the war, millions of stories emerge silently... The reality of ruthless conditions provides many ready-made scripts, but sometimes we need to dilute the horror of the Iraqi reality to make it fiction. We have to simplify reality to make it believable.

Finally, the fourth major sending country has been the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The first Saudi writer was Abdullah Bakhit (IWP '93), who arrived only a year after King Fahd's initial attempts to approximate a form of participatory governance within the bounds of his monarchy. In 1992, the king introduced the Basic Law, which was the first time there had ever been any sort of written constitution, and in 1993 set up the Majlis al-Shura, a consultative assembly meant to expand public participation in the political process and establish true consensus (Gasiorowski). It is worth noting that Saudi participation in the program only began after initial steps were made towards a more ostensibly democratic form of government. Since residents are usually nominated by local embassy staff, participation in the program reflects a desire to participate more fully in the international community as well.

## **Methodology**

While it is difficult, if not frequently impossible, to prove a causal relationship between the IWP residency and world events, some interesting possibilities arise when one considers the residency in the context of global events. It is difficult to think, given the fact that a significant source of funding for IWP is the U.S. Department of State, that there are no external pressures or influences on the program regarding who gets to participate. Moreover, considering the program's aim of cultural diplomacy, it stands to reason that global happenings and international political priorities would come into play while deciding whom to invite to the residency, whether intentionally or not. With this in mind, I have proposed several causal relationships between the fall residency and contemporary world events.

In addition to library research, historical exploration, and program documents like panel presentations, this paper depends heavily on personal interviews with program staff and community members as well as a short questionnaire, in English and in Arabic, distributed among IWP alumni.

## **Personal recollection**

Sahar Khalifeh said, "The United Nations could not bring Israel and Palestine together, but the International Writing Program has" (Merrill). Many alumni have fond memories of their time at the residency, and several have written extensively about their experiences. Abdullah al-Wesali wrote a whole novel about his experiences here, called ١٠ اسابيع بجوار النهر [Ten weeks by the river].

One common thread among residents' recollections is the value of building a community of writers. Alice Yousef (IWP '16) said,

I have remained in close contact with many of my IWP colleagues, writers based in my country and colleagues abroad... IWP was and still is a life-changing experience, and I grew on many levels during my stay in Iowa City... My literary career rose to an international level, having read in front of audiences from around the world, which helped me see the effect of poetry on people. Most importantly, having the international IWP alum family gives me a great sense of pride and a great sense of support on both the personal and the professional levels.

Hanaa Hijazi also remembers her fellow residents fondly: "I really loved the group I was with, and I still remember them well and remember the good times I spent with them. I really hope I get to see them again." And Hamdy el-Gazzar: "The program had a big effect indeed. It

was the first time I got to travel at all! I had a great experience in IWP and made a lot of friends, learned a lot from the others, and shared my writing and views with them.”

## Impact

Ali Shalash once said that he wished he could write in English, so that he could have a wider audience than Arabic afforded him (Van Allen-Shalash). Arabic-speaking participants in Between the Lines, a high school outreach program at IWP, often echo that sentiment, preferring to test their creative mettle in English rather than their native Arabic (Merrill).

Several of these writers, however, operate in a space between the two languages. In January 2018, Kuwaiti writer and performance poet Nada Faris (IWP '13) gave a talk at the Contemporary Art Platform in Kuwait called “The Arabic Language Will Not Save Us,” in which she discussed the development of an “Anglowaiti” identity and writing in English rather than Arabic:

We are showcasing the socio-political infrastructure that gave birth to a modern Kuwaiti identity, one that communicates and thinks and expresses itself artistically in English rather than Arabic... We write, and draw, and produce Anglowaiti literature, which we do not create for a Western audience, as some might assume, but for our Anglowaiti brothers and sisters... In Anglowaiti literature, we share our experiences in a horizontal language, so my sister who has a Filipina mother and a Kuwaiti father can write poetry in English and stand next to me on stage. We both discuss our upbringings in Kuwait in a language that allows us to conduct a reciprocal dialogue. In other words, I do not have to write for a group who cannot respond to me in the same language.

In this context, English functions not necessarily as a language of privilege, but as an equalizing force in a country with deep cultural and linguistic divisions and social stratification.

A few residents like Alice Yousef have also turned to English with some success, saying in an interview, “I write in English from left to right, and I read from right to left in Arabic, so there’s this place where both languages are active and both languages are working in my brain at all times, and one of them affects the other somehow.” Yousef earned an MA in Writing from the University of Warwick, in the United Kingdom, and works as a translator between Arabic and English.

Yousef, like her Palestinian peers, has a poetic imagination deeply shaped by the political situation in Israel and Palestine. Born to a family displaced from Jaffa (now known as Tel Aviv) by the Nakba (“catastrophe”), the Israeli takeover of Arab lands, her poetry frequently evokes her day-to-day experiences in the West Bank as well as the ones in her family’s past that continue to have an impact. Similarly, Bisharat, who writes both in Arabic and in Hebrew, acknowledges the complexities of living and writing as a journalist in that context. “I often asked myself why the Hebrew media was dominated only by Jewish journalists, and why they had the right to shape the public opinion in Israel, while the Arab inhabitants were in the position of being shaped,” he writes, before going on to say, “My writing in Hebrew is still Arabic writing. I mean here that I’m carrying on my back, even when I write an article, my cultural baggage: the Arabic legacy, literature, popular stories, sayings, and legends.”

Saudi novelist Abdullah al-Wesali (IWP '14) was so moved by his time in Iowa that wrote a novel inspired by events from his residency. He was invited to be the keynote speaker at the inaugural Kimberley Book Fair in 2016, where the theme was censorship. Appropriate, perhaps, since al-Wesali’s first novel was banned in Saudi Arabia. “The Arab world is missing

freedom, freedom of expression and freedom to write without societal control, a control made worse by religion and political oppression,” al-Wesali said. “That’s why my CV is empty; a writer is not really free from himself and the many authorities watching his every movement, and his freedom has a price.”

A few other writers have run afoul of their respective governments as well, either for their writing or political positions. For example, Ali Shalash spent five years in prison in Nasser’s Egypt without being charged after his arrest at a lecture by Jean-Paul Sartre in Cairo, where he happened to converse with a known dissident (Van Allen-Shalash).

While Saudi writer and IWP alumnus Abdullah Thabit did not directly face government censorship, he faced death threats from other Saudis upon the publication of his book *The 20<sup>th</sup> Terrorist*, which recounted the years he spent as a member of a terrorist group before getting out at the age of 20. He wrote it after seeing pictures of Ahmed Alnami, a 9/11 hijacker from Thabit’s hometown, on the news. “I felt like someone who’d gotten off a boat just in time and then watched it capsize with him and the others onboard,” Thabit told Faiza Saleh Ambah of *The Washington Post*. “I love Nami, but I hate what he did. And it terrifies me that that could have been me.”

On the other hand, Hanaa Hijazi (IWP ’09), a doctor, novelist, and artist who is also from Saudi Arabia, has not encountered this kind of opposition to her work. Of the two books that she has published since her residency, one (*Mukhtalaf* [Different], 2012) received a prize from Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Culture, and the other (*Imra’atan* [Two Women], 2015) was translated into French. “Because the Arab world goes through much tragedy on many fronts, both political and social,” she said, “and because personal freedom is still an important issue, we find that most [Arabic] writing revolves around these axes.”

Hani Elkadi (IWP ’81) was described as a “renaissance man,” and not without reason. A surgeon by training, he became a poet, translator, teacher, and painter. Born in Istanbul and raised in Alexandria, he now lives in Iowa City, teaching at Kirkwood Community College after years at the Carver College of Medicine and the Iowa City Community School District. Like Ali Shalash, Elkadi met his wife here in Iowa City during his residency.

One collaboration that came about through IWP connections was the 2003 publication of *Iraqi Poetry Today*, edited by Saadi Simawe and Daniel Weissbort. Profoundly affected by the events of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath, Simawe wrote in his introduction,

In spite of these international, national, and personal challenges, our faith in poetry abides. We continue to believe in its ability to represent the best aspects of human culture... Although I lost faith in politics long ago, I still believe in the power of the word, and especially in the power of translation.

Simawe, a professor at Grinnell College, maintained his connection to the IWP community until his death in 2017.

Another significant collaboration resulting from the fall residency was Sadek Mohammed and Christopher Merrill’s joint effort to have Baghdad recognized as a UNESCO City of Literature, alongside Iowa City and over a dozen other cities around the world. This ongoing partnership with the literary community in Baghdad has also resulted in a number of other projects, such as [Lanterns of Hope](#), a collection of original and translated poetry by Iraqi youth in English, Arabic, and Kurdish; [BookWings Iraq](#), a collaborative theater performance featuring short plays written by American and Iraqi playwrights; and the [WhitmanWeb project](#), which included a [translation into Arabic](#) of “Song of Myself” by Nadia Fayidh Mohammed.

More recently, Autumn Hill Books published *The Same Gate*, a collection born from a conference by the same name that included poets from the U.S., Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran, centered around the work and legacy of 13th century poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, whose influence is evident in the poetic traditions of each of these countries and peoples. There has also been a renewed interest in inviting writers from North Africa, especially Algeria, including poet Salah Badis ('18) and fiction writer and playwright Hajar Bali ('16). As decades pass and priorities shift, the International Writing Program continues to broaden its focus to reach all corners of the Arab world.

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<sup>1</sup> A note on nomenclature regarding Palestine: At the same time the first Palestinian writers arrived in Iowa, the land was occupied by Israel to the east and Jordan to the west, though Jordan lost control of the West Bank in 1967 and officially renounced all claim to it in 1988. The Palestinian Authority, established in 1994, performs many of the functions of government without the authority of a sovereign state. In 2012, the United Nations began to refer to the State of Palestine, and by 2015, 193 members of the U.N. General Assembly recognized the State of

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Palestine's legitimacy. The United States is not among them. In all U.S. Department of State communications, the term Palestinian Territories is used.